

# ***BRAWLER***

***NEIL CONNELLY***



***ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS***  
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**T**here was a time when I could see the future, not that it did me much good. My visions came when they wanted, never giving me more than a fleeting glimpse of what was to come. They never offered enough detail or advance warning for me to win great fortunes or sidestep catastrophes. Take for example the very first one I ever had, back in fourth grade, when we lived in the yellow rent house on Seventeenth Street. That was the Tuesday night when my mom asked my father one too many questions about the Civil War and all our lives got ripped to shreds. It's a pretty crappy gift that lets you know trouble's coming for the ones you love most, but doesn't give you the chance to save them.

As the years passed, I'd see flashes now and then, but during my high school wrestling matches, the visions came on strong. My opponent would start to lean forward, or shift his foot just so, or an eyebrow would twitch — and my opening would become clear. That's when I knew with absolute certainty what was about to occur, in that split second before that next move, when I'd sweep his leg or hit a fireman's carry or headlock him so hard the whole gym would rock when his shoulders slammed the mat. Coach Gallaher said it was my intuition, that I was just visualizing the move before I did it. But it felt like way more than that.

One of these mini prophecies came to me in the state

semifinals against Tony Dunkirk over in Hershey. This was the bout that was supposed to put me into the state championship for the second year running. Five minutes before go time, I was getting into my zone, black hoodie tucked over my head, earbuds in place. Rather than stretching with the other wrestlers warming up, I was by myself along a wall, pacing back and forth like a panther or leopard in a cage. In one fist I gripped my secondhand MP3 player, boxy with a lightning-cracked screen. Music is one of the things that helps me stay even. Vintage rock 'n' roll works the best — Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, even Van Halen (but only before David Lee left. Don't talk to me about Sammy Hagar). These were the bands my mom loved back in high school, and this was the heavy metal music she played on our nighttime drives around Harrisburg's beltway when I was a kid, circling the city in her blue Subaru. Waiting for my match to begin, alone in the shadows along that wall, I listened to AC/DC's lead singer Bon Scott scream about riding a highway to hell, something about being on his way to the promised land.

Between songs, I glanced up from my MP3's fractured glass and saw Shrimp hightailing it through the other wrestlers, all jumping rope or bouncing lightly. With his bleached blond hair and pink skin, Shrimp tends to stand out. As he closed in on me, I plucked one earbud free just in time to hear him say, "Coach G, everybody, we're all over by mat three. You're like second on deck."

"I know when I'm in the hole."

"Ain't you gonna warm up more?"

“I’m warmed up enough for Dunkirk.”

Shrimp shook his head and folded his skinny arms, looked away. A sophomore with more attitude than talent, he only goes about ninety-three pounds despite an addiction to Happy Meals. I’m in the unlimited class and tip the scales at 235. That’s two and a half Shrimps, a fact I remind him of now and then. He turned back to me. “C’mon man. Don’t make the same mistake you did in Bethlehem.”

At the Christmas City tournament, it’s true, I got a little lazy in the second period. I was rocking Dunkirk in a cradle, and he managed to drop a foot down, push back into me enough to tilt us so my one shoulder grazed the mat. Everybody flipped like I was going to get pinned. I recovered quick and fifteen seconds later added one more win to my undefeated streak. Dunkirk raised a stink, claimed the ref didn’t call me pinned as part of some conspiracy. Later, I heard he was going around calling me a cheat. He was all bluster though, no real threat.

Shrimp swallowed and said, “Look. Your mom’s getting kind of upset.”

With that, I told him, “Let’s go.” That lady’s gone through enough for me.

As I followed Shrimp into the main part of the arena, the three mats stretched out before us in a way that reminded me of a three-ring circus. The stands weren’t packed like I knew they would be for the championship bouts the next day, but there were still a ton of people in the audience, maybe four thousand. Wrestling’s a major deal in Pennsylvania, a place with a

long tradition of coal miners, farmers, and steelworkers where fathers still want their sons to be able to kick a little ass.

While we cut along the bottom row of bleachers heading for the far mat, I could hear the little whispers of folks as we passed. “That’s MacIntyre.” “What a mess.” “Wouldn’t want to be on the wrong side of that dude.” “Waste of talent.”

I know why people think the way they do, like they know the real me. They’ve read the same online articles I have, the ones with titles like “Undefeated, Unsportsmanlike, and Unacceptable” or “Why PA Wrestling Doesn’t Need Eddie MacIntyre” or my favorite, “MacIntyre — Brute Boy!” (Mom says that nickname stuck because of my boyish face, especially the baby-blue eyes that reminded her of her dad.)

Those writers — all failed athletes you can bet — casually mention my record, 54-0 my junior and senior year. They all point out how I breezed through states last year and was the #1 favorite to win again. They all bring up the fact that my sophomore year, I got kicked off the team at Bishop McDevitt High School for violent outbursts. They call me a loose cannon.

Who knows, maybe what my mom says is true and I play into the image a bit too much. I’m no monster. But I’m not upset that people are wary of me, that some think I’m a bit nuts. People don’t want to mess with a guy who could be sort of crazy. True or not, those stories keep me safe. Out on the mat, when some other guy is trying to rip my head off, that’s when life makes the most sense to me. In the ebb and flow of combat, I’m in control. It’s not just the occasional prophetic vision I get, though that doesn’t hurt. Even when some opponent pulls an unexpected

move, I can react to it. I'm not in the dark. I'm not smelling mothballs.

As Shrimp and me came up on the mat where I'd be wrestling soon, I saw Dunkirk's familiar shape ahead of us. He was facing away from me, getting last-second advice from his coach. I was trying to think of something to say to get in his head, but then just as we neared I heard him tell his coach, "Ever hear about that freak's dad? No wonder he's so screwed up."

This caught me by surprise, kind of stole my breath, and I lost the urge to drop a cute crack. Instead I just barged into him, hard enough to drive Dunkirk into his coach, who threw me a dirty look I happily returned without breaking stride. Folks in the crowd caught this little interaction and a bunch rose up, hollering crap like "Cheap shot!" and "Hothead!"

I stopped and turned, ready to take on a rowdy fan or Dunkirk or anybody who wanted to challenge me. But a hand gripped my shoulder from behind and I glanced back to see Coach Gallaher. "Save it for the match," he said. He and Shrimp ushered me away, past the scorer's table to where a little gang of Camp Hill Lions was gathered. My fellow wrestlers — LeQuan, Carson, Tyler — rose up on their feet. Behind them, my mom stood too, running a hand nervously through her long black hair streaked with white. Her thin eyebrows were bunched up and her expression nervous, like my winning wasn't a foregone conclusion. Life had taught her to expect disaster.

"Don't be so worried," I told her.

The buzzer sounded behind us as that match came to a close. The wrestlers shook hands and the ref raised the winner's

arm. The loser huffed off, sagging. After a quick shuffle, two new wrestlers hustled to the center of the circle, crouched into position, and waited for the whistle. I was on deck now. Next up.

“You need a drink?” my mom asked, holding up a water bottle. I wasn’t thirsty, but I took a swig anyway.

“You got to get warm and loose,” Coach Gallaher said. “Jump some rope?”

I waved the suggestion away. “I’m all good,” I said. “I got everything covered.”

Pacing along the wall, I’d been working a few things out in my head, how I wanted this match to go down. I didn’t just want to win. I wanted to put on a show.

And I wasn’t only thinking of the fans. I knew for a fact that a half dozen college recruiters were in the audience, waiting with iPhones to record the infamous Eddie MacIntyre, to capture firsthand evidence of the Brute Boy in action. I’d been contacted by colleges as far away as NC State and Oklahoma. But I had reasons to stay local, so I was more interested in the offers I’d received from Lehigh and Penn State. These were the two best wrestling schools in the state — and both with decent programs in criminal justice. Something about the idea of being a cop appealed to me, somewhere on the far side of all this.

I stepped up onto the first bleacher next to my mom and scanned the crowd, looking for the face of one of those recruiters, but I didn’t see either. A short guy about six rows up might’ve been a new one, from Pitt or Scranton. He smiled at me kind of crooked, like we knew each other. I stared at him and his



Coke-bottle glasses, which along with his greasy dark hair made him seem like a nerdy troll. I didn't like how those buggy eyes drilled into me.

My mom reached out and took my hand. "Be safe, okay?"

I looked down at her looking up at me, her thin face, sunken cheeks, the right eye aimed my way but her left locked to the side. This lazy eye makes it look like she's perpetually checking to be sure no one is coming, like she's never sure she's safe. That eye is one more thing I can never fix.

"Tell that to the Dunkirk. He's the one that needs to be worrying."

At this, there was a loud whomp behind me, and I spun to see a kid in a blue singlet squirming on his back, mounted by his opponent, who'd clearly just stuck him. The ref smacked the mat, signaling a pin, and I unzipped my hoodie. "Game time," Shrimp shouted, smacking me on the shoulders.

I headed for the mat and Coach Gallaher swung in front of me, slapped my cheeks a few times to get the blood going. "Keep it simple. Don't forget the goal: Advance to the finals."

I had no doubt that I would win, but as I trotted onto the mat and took my stance in the center circle, I focused on my other objective: I was going to humiliate Dunkirk. Make him pay for his insults by putting on a display of my talents so impressive it would silence all critics — this was the future I had carefully plotted.

For a while, my plan worked to perfection.

Off the whistle I shot in low instead of locking up like we big boys in the upper weight divisions tend to. This caught

everyone off guard, including Dunkirk, so I scooped up a single leg and dumped him with ease, then scrambled on top for my two-point takedown. Stunned as he was, it wasn't hard to break him down from all fours to his belly. Chest pressed between his shoulder blades, I slid in a quick half nelson, my hand snaking under his armpit and latching on to the back of his head. At that point it's simply a matter of mechanics, just like a lever. As I spun to the side and cranked, Dunkirk slowly rotated to his back. All this time I was calm, patient, and methodical. Completely in control.

With Dunkirk's shoulders exposed, the ref started sweeping his hand to signal I was earning back points. I got my four, shimmed my chest back onto his, sunk the half a bit deeper, and shoved into him like a bulldozer. I could see one shoulder blade flat, and the other was inching closer to the mat. I ignored Dunkirk huffing and straining. The ref, a grandpa-looking guy with a crown of white hair and a shiny bald top, was belly down and right there, cheek pressed flat, whistle held loosely in his lips. He even lifted his right hand, ready to slap the mat and advance me into the finals. I was half an inch away from a first-period pin and had power to spare.

That's when I eased back and let Dunkirk up.

Sometimes in a match, a takedown artist will let a guy up if he's way behind and is convinced he can't turn him for back points. But in that situation, which you see a lot, the guy's not on his back like Dunkirk was, certainly not on the verge of getting stuck. I can say with some certainty that none of the four thousand fans in attendance — and you can bet they all were